

A newspaper vendor peers over piles of newspapers as he looks out from his self-built newsstand on a street corner in New York City.



# Newspapers in AMERICA

BY DEBORAH POTTER

The first American newspaper was not in print for long, but it did have a lasting impact on journalism in the United States. *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick*, published in Boston in 1690, included general news on the state of the harvest and a smallpox outbreak, but also a controversial report that outraged the British colonial government. The newspaper's feisty publisher, Benjamin Harris, had printed the first issue without government approval, and the British immediately shut down the newspaper.





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A crowd gathers outside the *New York Journal* building to read bulletins about the Spanish-American War, circa 1898. William Randolph Hearst, publisher of the *New York Journal*, sensationalized the war to attract readers for the newspaper.

So began a tradition in the American press of strong-willed publishers supporting journalism that challenged authority and held the powerful accountable. But it took years for that tradition to take root. Before the American colonies achieved independence from Britain in 1776, most colonial newspapers heeded the lesson of *Publick Occurrences* and stayed away from controversy.

After independence, the early leaders of the United States moved to protect the press from government interference. Thomas Jefferson, for one, believed a free press was an essential guardian of liberty. “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter,” he wrote. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitu-

tion, approved in 1791, guarantees freedom of the press.

With that protection, many newspapers that had become adjuncts of political parties criticized their opponents in the harshest of terms. Fed up with what it considered slander, the ruling Federalist Party soon passed the Sedition Act, under which anyone who criticized the government in print could be fined or imprisoned. Several opposition publishers were convicted before the law was allowed to expire.

The U.S. newspaper industry grew dramatically along with the new country. At the turn of the 19th century, fewer than 200 newspapers were published in the United States. By 1825 there were more than 800—twice as many as in Great Britain—making America “by far the greatest newspa-



per country in the world,” according to historian David Paul Nord.

Most of these newspapers were published once a week and relied on unpaid correspondents to provide the content, mostly political news and views. The newspapers were sold by subscription, so only the wealthy could afford to read them. But the newspaper industry was about to undergo a commercial and democratic revolution.

In 1833, the *New York Sun* became the first of a new breed of newspaper—inexpensive, sold on the street by newsboys, and staffed by paid reporters. Clearly setting itself apart from the elite newspapers of the day, the *Sun*’s motto was, “It Shines for ALL.” Known as the “penny press” because each issue cost just one cent, the *Sun* and its imitators were wildly popular. Within two years, three “penny papers” in New York were selling twice as many copies as 11 other city papers combined.

The penny press invented the modern concept of news by expanding the definition to include not just politics and international developments but sports, crime, and society doings as well. As the *Sun*’s editor, Charles Dana, put it in 1882: “When a dog bites a man, that is not news. But when a man bites a dog, that is news.”

The penny papers also signaled a tension between public service and profit that became a hallmark of the American press. Publishers could sell newspapers cheaply because most of their income came from advertising. To attract advertisers and make money, the papers had to appeal to the widest possible audience, which meant giving people what they wanted to know as well as what they needed to know. Newspapers became a business, but they remained a bulwark of democracy.

One change that followed the new business model was a concerted decision to avoid partisanship for fear of alienating readers and advertisers. No longer did most American newspapers push a political agenda. The *Chicago Daily News*, established in 1875, had this motto: “No axes to grind, no friends to reward, and no enemies to punish.”

In the mid 1800s, American newspapers also invented a new way of gathering news—the interview. American journalists were the first to interview the Pope and government ministers in Germany and Britain, according to historian Michael Schudson. Reporters were no longer mere transcribers of information provided by others; they actively sought out news and became authorities in their own right.



Newspaper boxes with both national circulation newspapers (the *New York Times*, *USA Today*) and local newspapers line this street in Coral Gables, Florida.

## Famous American Newspapers

**The New York Times** is one of America’s greatest newspapers. First published in 1851, the *Times* became a standard-setter after Adolph Ochs bought it in 1896. Although now publicly owned, it remains under the control of Ochs’ descendants. In 1971, the *Times* made history by printing the *Pentagon Papers*, a top-secret assessment of American involvement in Vietnam. The U.S. Supreme Court supported the newspaper’s right to publish the documents. Known as the “Gray Lady” for its sober tone, the *Times* is printed at plants across America, giving it a national circulation.

**The Washington Post** is nationally known for its coverage of politics and government, but it is primarily a metropolitan newspaper serving the nation’s capital and the Washington, D.C., area. Founded in 1877, the newspaper was almost bankrupt when Eugene Meyer bought it in 1933. Thirty years later, control of the now-profitable newspaper passed to Meyer’s daughter, Katharine Graham. She built its reputation by supporting investigative journalism, such as the paper’s reporting on the Watergate scandal in the 1970s.

**The Wall Street Journal** is highly regarded for its business coverage. Established in 1882 as part of the Dow Jones Company, the newspaper developed its distinct style in the 1940s under editor Barney Kilgore. He encouraged non-traditional writing styles and expanded the newspaper’s circulation. Today, the *Journal* is considered a national newspaper, known for its conservative editorial voice and its well-written feature stories.

**The Los Angeles Times** is the largest circulation daily in the western United States, known for its strong national and international coverage. Founded in 1881, the newspaper was controlled by one family until the Times-Mirror Company was sold to the Tribune Company in 2000. Since then, its circulation has declined sharply but it remains a well-regarded publication.

**USA Today** is one of the “youngest” newspapers in America and is the most widely read, with a national daily circulation of over two million. Founded in 1982 by Al Neuharth of the Gannett Corporation, this newspaper was initially mocked for its deliberate lack of depth. Critics called it “McPaper,” suggesting it served up news like McDonald’s serves up fast food. But its shorter stories, accompanied by color photographs, charts, and graphs, appealed to American readers and its style began to influence other newspapers. In recent years, the paper has gained respect for its solid reporting.





In this photo from 2002, members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association examine an issue of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black owned and operated newspaper in the United States.

As newsgathering evolved, so did news writing. To cover the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865), newspapers sent their own reporters to the scene to file dispatches by telegraph. Because their transmissions often were interrupted, the reporters adopted a new style of writing to put the most important information in the first paragraphs. This “inverted pyramid” style, using a summary lead, remains the most common writing style in newspapers today.

At the end of the 19th century, powerful newspaper owners left their stamp on the industry. William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* competed aggressively for new readers, especially the growing immigrant population. These newspapers used big headlines, lots of illustrations, and simple language. They also featured sensational stories in a style that became known as “yellow journalism.” Hearst even used his newspaper to campaign for U.S. involvement in Cuba’s fight for independence from Spain. When his reporter in Havana cabled that he couldn’t find a story there, Hearst reportedly replied, “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.”

At the same time, U.S. journalism was becoming more centered on facts. An American handbook for journalists published in 1894 stated, “Opinions are the peculiar province of the editorial writer. The spirit of modern journalism demands that the news and the editorials be kept distinctly separate. The one deals with facts, the other with theoretical interpretations.” Increasingly, reporters were expected to have more formal education than in the early days of newspapers, and many began to specialize in covering specific topics such as health and business. In 1904, Joseph Pulitzer endowed the first journalism school in America, at New York’s Columbia University, saying, “I wish to begin a movement that will raise journalism to the rank of a learned profession.”

This responsible journalism was what Adolph Ochs had in mind when he became publisher of the *New York Times* in 1896. Ochs believed a newspaper could succeed financially without resorting to sensationalism. Over the years, he proved to be right. Ochs’ goal was “to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved.” The *Times* emphasized decency



and accuracy, as reflected in its slogan—"All The News That's Fit to Print"—and it remains one of the world's great newspapers.

The number of daily newspapers in America peaked at almost 2,600 in 1910. Not coincidentally, that was the beginning of a long period of consolidation in newspaper ownership. Edward W. Scripps established the first large chain of newspapers in 1895, controlling 34 papers in 15 states. By the early 1930s, the renamed Scripps-Howard chain and five other newspaper companies controlled more than two-thirds of the country's daily circulation.

A second revolution in ownership began in 1960, when the publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones, Inc., became the first newspaper company to issue publicly traded stock. Within 20 years, public ownership of newspaper companies had become the norm.

With strong financial backing, the chain papers drove many of their competitors out of business, and the newspaper industry began to shrink. The most recent figures, from 2004, put the number of

dailies at just under 1,500. Most of them are published in the morning, a major change since 1960 when evening papers dominated the industry. As more and more Americans turned to television for the news, they stopped reading evening papers, forcing hundreds to fold while others switched publication to mornings.

America's diversity has always been reflected in its newspapers. In the early 1800s, German-language newspapers served immigrant communities. In 1827, the African-American press was launched in New York with *Freedom's Journal*, one of several papers that took up the cause of abolishing slavery. Today, American newspapers are published in dozens of languages, from Vietnamese and Korean in California to Yiddish in New York. Spanish-language newspapers make up the bulk of the circulation, however, with more than 350 weekly or daily papers reaching 17 million readers, according to the Latino Print Network.

Despite the large numbers of newspapers in circulation, newspaper readership has been declining dramatically. As recently as 1994, almost



The general manager of *El Nuevo Día*—a daily Spanish-language newspaper published in Orlando, Florida—introduces supermarket clients to the newspaper, which published its first issue in 2003.



## Anatomy of a Newspaper

Daily newspapers in United States are usually published in separately folded sections to make it easier for readers to find the stories that interest them. Having separate sections also allows a newspaper's advertisers to reach specific types of readers. (For example, sports sections are filled with ads aimed at men because surveys show that far more men than women read the sports pages.)

The basic structure of most newspapers is fairly simple, with four or five main sections that are published daily. The first section covers general news; national news and world news usually appear in this section. The general news section is followed by sections for local news, features or lighter stories, such as human interest stories, business news, and sports. Some newspapers print separate sections for classified advertising for jobs, cars, and housing. Many newspapers publish additional sections once a week, focusing on special interest topics such as food, arts and entertainment, health, or technology.

American newspapers keep news separate from opinion. The editorial page of a newspaper features editorials, which express the opinions of the newspaper's editors, and Letters to the Editor, which feature the opinions of its readers. Additional opinion pieces, usually written by individual columnists, are most often confined to what's known as the "op-ed" page, so called because it usually appears opposite the editorial page. Some newspapers expand the op-ed page into a separate section on Sundays, usually the largest edition of the week because people have more time to read it.



A pedestrian in Chicago walks past a row of newspaper boxes, including one with the young-adult oriented *RedEye*, published by the *Chicago Tribune*.

60 percent of Americans said they read a daily newspaper. Ten years later that number had dropped to just 42 percent, and most of those readers were over 50. To reach more readers, American newspapers have developed online editions. Nearly one in three Internet users, or 43 million Americans, visit newspaper sites each month, either at home or at work, according to the Newspaper Association of America. Several papers also have developed new print editions designed to appeal to younger readers. In 2002, for example, the *Chicago Tribune* launched *RedEye*, a free tabloid published five days a week, designed to appeal to younger readers. The paper says it has 200,000 daily readers, people the *Tribune* hopes will eventually pick up its flagship paper.

Another bright spot in the U.S. newspaper industry has been the performance of weekly newspapers, which have grown in both numbers and circulation, up ten percent over the past eight years. "Alternative" weeklies also are on the upswing, modeled after New York's *Village Voice*, founded in 1955 on what it calls "no-holds barred reporting and criticism." These newspapers focus almost exclusively on local news, with a strong dose of opinion and extensive entertainment reviews.

The American public's view of newspapers is decidedly mixed. People generally have a favorable opinion of the press, but they don't always believe what they read. Only about half of those surveyed in 2004 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press said they believe all or most of what they see in their daily newspapers.

Despite declining readership, newspapers still play an indispensable role in keeping the American public informed. As Donald Graham, the late publisher of

the *Washington Post*, said, the job of a newspaper is “the inescapably impossible task of providing every week a first rough draft of history that will never really be completed about a world we can never really understand.”

## Websites of Interest

### Editor and Publisher

<http://www.editorandpublisher.com>

This monthly journal covers the newspaper industry in the United States; the website provides some of the magazine’s content, plus regular news updates.

### High School Journalism

<http://www.highschooljournalism.org/>

Produced by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, this site offer lesson plans and resources for teachers and students of journalism.

### Journalism History Bibliography

[http://www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=1199](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=1199)

The Poynter Institute, a school for journalists in the United States, offers this list of links and books about journalism history.

### Newseum

<http://www.newseum.org/>

The website of this “interactive museum of news” features daily front pages from around the world, plus online “exhibits” about journalism history.

### What a Century!

<http://archives.cjr.org/year/99/1/century.asp>

This article from Columbia Journalism Review provides a comprehensive review of American journalism in the 20th century.

### Write Site

<http://www.writesite.org/default.htm>

Designed for middle school teachers and students, this site offers a newsroom tour, style guide, and lesson plans.

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Carl Bernstein (left) and Bob Woodward sit in the newsroom of the *Washington Post* in this 1973 photo. Woodward and Bernstein won a Pulitzer Prize for their reporting of the Watergate cover-up that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

## Some Famous American Journalists

### Elijah P. Lovejoy (1802–1837)

As editor of a weekly newspaper in Illinois, the *Alton Observer*, Lovejoy took a strong stand against slavery and drew the anger of slavery supporters. Three times, mobs destroyed his newspaper’s presses, but he kept writing about what he called “an awful evil and sin.” In 1837, he was shot to death trying to save his printing press, and he became a martyr for freedom of the press.

### Nellie Bly (1864–1922)

Her real name was Elizabeth Jane Cochran, but under the pseudonym “Nellie Bly” she became known as the “best reporter in America.” Working for the *New York World*, she was a pioneer in undercover reporting to root out injustice. In 1888, Bly had herself committed to a mental institution for women, and her stories about the abuses there led to major reforms. They also made her a celebrity. Later, Bly made headlines for traveling around the world in 72 days, beating the “record” set in Jules Verne’s novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

### Bob Woodward (1943– ) and Carl Bernstein (1944– )

As young reporters at the *Washington Post*, Woodward and Bernstein teamed up to cover one of the biggest stories in U.S. history. Their reporting on the Watergate scandal led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974. Woodward and Bernstein became legends—*Time* magazine called them “Woodstein”—and role models for future journalists. Their use of confidential sources, including a top official they called Deep Throat, and their meticulous approach to fact checking became standards in American journalism.